DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 186 344 SO 012 597

AUTHOR Kasschau, Richard A.
TITLE A Rationale for the Teaching of Psychology in the High Schools.
PUB DATE Sep 79
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (New York, NY, September 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum; *Educational Needs; *Educational Objectives; *Educational Practices; Literature Reviews; *Psychology; Secondary Education; Social Sciences; Social Studies; State of the Art Reviews; Student Interests

ABSTRACT

The author presents a rationale for adding psychology to the high school social studies curriculum. Also, changes within the environment of secondary schools which affect educators' willingness to offer psychology courses are identified. Approximately 750,000 high school students are currently enrolled in some sort of psychology course. In spite of this impressive enrollment figure, however, many educators argue against including psychology in the high school curriculum. Reasons for not including psychology in the curriculum are that teachers are not sufficiently trained in psychology to teach it well; students are too immature to understand psychological concepts before college; and psychology focuses on personal adjustment rather than intellectual concepts. The rationale for including psychology in high school is based on four major premises--that it is already taught successfully in many schools, offers high school students a chance to work with a scientific discipline before college, prepares students for a service-oriented society, and can help students adjust to society. Factors influencing the increase in psychology courses in high school include a high degree of student interest, recognition that psychology can teach students about relating to a fast-paced world in which facts soon become dated, and belief on the part of teachers and parents that psychology will help adolescents resolve questions concerning personal worth and meaning. (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

JUN 09 1980

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Richard A. Kasschau
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED186344

A rationale for the teaching of psychology in the high schools

Richard A. Kasschau

University of Houston

Abstract

The change of psychology from its traditional role as a "sophomore college course" has caused considerable concern philosophically, accentuated by a lack of qualified teachers to provide adequate instructional services. The rationale For its inclusion in high school curricula is based on four premises:

First, psychology is already being taught successfully at the high school level in numbers now conservatively estimated to be three-quarters of a million students.

Second, more high school students today who finish high school are entering college. This change offers colleges the opportunity to provide students with more exposure to psychology, more typical of other science disciplines, especially if psychology is introduced before college.

Third, in his book Future Shock, Toffler suggests that our society is rapidly moving toward a service-oriented society and away from a consumption-based economy and society. He maintains that it is necessary to prepare our citizens for this new responsibility, both as intelligent consumers and as service providers.

Finally, Skinner comments in Beyond Freedom and Dignity about the need to prepare our citizens to get along with each other. Some of the psychology curriculum could be designed to help adolescents focus on adjustive skills and processes. Waiting for the collegiate years is not necessary for this type of education.

SO 012 597

JUN 09 1980

Paper presented at:
American Psychological Association meetings
New York, New York, September 1979

A rationale for the teaching of psychology in the high schools

Richard A. Kasschau

University of Houston

"In the early 1960s, an interviewer was trying to get Ernest Hemingway to identify the characteristics required for a person to be a 'great writer.' As the interviewer offered a list of various possibilities, Hemingway disparaged each in sequence. Finally, frustrated, the interviewer asked, 'Isn't there any one essential ingredient that you can identify?' Hemingway replied, 'Yes, there is. In order to be a great writer a person must have a built-in, shockproof crap detector" (Postman & Weingartner, 1969).

That delightful summary of the essential ingredient for successful living is contained in a challenging book entitled Teaching as a Subversive Activity. I don't want to bore you with a book report. However, I would like to borrow some of the central messages from that important text. I'd like to apply them to the situation we face as we ponder how best to introduce our discipline of psychology to high school students.

SP 012 597

In the first chapter of their book, Postman and Weingartner identify three major problems being faced by citizens of today's Western world. The first of these is the significant change in living style being brought about by the media--television, tape recorders, radio, movies...you name it. It cannot be denied that television alone has changed the nature of American family life, especially when we find that--aside from sleeping--children entering public schools in the United States have spent more time engaged in the semi-passive activity called "watching television" than any other activity!

As educators, we have been very slow to recognize that point, and the minimal efforts of the CPB and the Public Broadcasting System offer no solace.

A second major problem identified by Postman and Weingartner is caused by what they call a "burgeoning bureaucracy". Among other points they note that as bureaucracies grow, the manner in which things are done (according to "procedure"!) steadily gains importance over what is done, ultimately even whether it is done! We'll return to this problem a bit later, but I think it has some interesting implications for the type of experiences and strategies to which we should be exposing our students in the precollege and college classrooms.

Finally, Postman and Weingartner identify a complex array of problems that have been variously labeled by other authors. It concerns the stability/lability dimension of our world. Called the information explosion by some; its effects lead to "future shock" in the vernacular of others. But the spirit of these problems is perhaps best caught by a quote from Alfred North Whitehead in The Adventure of Ideas:

> "Our sociological theories, our political philosophy, our practical maxims of business, our political economy, and our doctrines of education are derived from an unbroken tradition of great thinkers and of practical examples from the age of Plato. . .to the end of the last century. The whole of this tradition is warped by the vicious assumption that each generation will substantially live amid the conditions governing the lives of its fathers and will transmit those conditions to mould with equal force the lives of its children. We are living in the first period of human history for which this assumption is false" (Whitehead as cited in Postman & Weingartner, 1969).

But enough of philosophy and world problems. How does this bear on psychology in the precollege classroom? Quite directly, I am going to assert. The media, the bureaucracy, and our fast-paced, changing world. . . Seemingly since 1879--and certainly since 1970!--precollege and university level teachers of psychology have been arguing

over an issue that is difficult to pin down, yet it seems a crucial one. It was captured in a booklet by Kasschau and Wertheimer (1974) who forced the issue by identifying those who teach psychology as a discipline, in contrast to those who stress the application of psychological principles in the lives of the students. These do not need to be in opposition: Theory and practice, research and application--hardly a novel issue! Yet it won't seem to go away. Why? What <u>are</u> the arguments in defense of each approach?

I would like to analyze those arguments, and then see if we can relate them to a rationale for teaching psychology in high school. The issues separating each approach--content versus adjustment--are <u>not</u> cleanly drawn, partly through confusion of terminology, partly because of underlying agreement on an array of presumptions and assumptions. But, the issue of confusion has been scoped out by John Bare in a presentation to the APA in 1977: He noted that:

> "The issue becomes hopelessly entangled in a number of other issues. . .:
>
> open-dialogue vs instruction with textbooks
>
> self-knowledge vs scientific knowledge
>
> personal-social vs empirical
>
> non-directive vs behavioristic
>
> an academic, structured, lecture-type course vs a dynamic, interpersonal, experience-type course, and finally
>
> cognition vs affection" (Bare, 1977, 1).

There are too many issues befuddling Bare's list. Let's clear some away. I do <u>not</u> sense that the crucial argument--to the extent there <u>is</u> one--focuses on either the content of psychology being offered, or on the teaching <u>techniques</u> being employed. Rather, I think the debate swirls around the <u>objectives</u> we have for the impact of our teaching on our students.

What <u>are</u> we trying to achieve in the precollege classroom? "Cognition vs

affection" is too abstract. Neither the "Open dialogue vs textbook instruction", nor the "non-directive vs behavioristic", nor the "academic, structured, lecture vs the dynamic interpersonal, experience-type" contrasts addresses anything so much as teaching techniques. I am going to assert that is a tangential issue. For me, the central issue is most accurately caught in the self-knowledge vs scientific knowledge or the personal-social vs empirical contrast. Jacob Bronowski comes as close as anyone to identifying the crucial distinction: "Man is a machine by birth but a self by experience" (1965, p. 83). It seems to me that we need to decide whether to educate the person or the self. Let's dwell on those contrasts a moment.

Two years ago at a similar paper session Ralph Mosher offered a paper entitled "The Little Big Horn Revisited"--in sub rosa reference to a confrontation that split the APA's 1970 Oberlin conference on precollege psychology almost from its start. Not one to shy from a verbal exchange, I initiated my presentation at that same paper session in defense of teaching psychological principles by a recitation of the actual circumstances under which General George Armstrong Custer sacreficed his own life and those of 267 officers and men. In short, he did so because he violated the conservative principles of warfare. Few would deny--as I said then--"there's an immediate lesson for teachers of precollege psychology in Custer's last stand(!)... But, some may need a bit of assistance in seeing it..." He violated principles based on experience and lost the battle; I was suggesting then that doing intellectual violence by not presenting the principles of psychology would operate to the detriment of the students.

In a more recent paper submitted to the American Psychologist, Norman Sprinthall has escalated the debate in an effort making half the points that need to be made concerning how to teach psychology in the high school classroom. He draws a parallel between those adovcating teaching principles or the content of psychology, and The Saber Tooth Curriculum, a delightful book written in 1939 by J. Abner Peddiwell--a pen-name. That book describes a paleolithic tribe that developed a curriculum among other things for

teaching how to use fire to scare off saber-tooth tigers. When an ice-age arrived, saber-tooth tigers died, to be replaced by bears who were attracted by fires. Because of this and other changes the curriculum had clearly become seriously dated, suddenly serving the populace adversely.

Sprinthall attempts to draw a parallel that is, I believe, overextended and reaching the wrong issue. His quote from Peddiwell illustrates my objection. A village elder, defending the traditional curriculum, says:

> "We don't teach fish-grabbing to grab fish, we teach it to develop a generalized agility which can never be developed by mere training (in net-making). We don't teach horse-clubbing to club horses, we teach it to develop a generalized strength in the learner which he can never get from so prosaic and specialized a thing as antelope-snare setting. We don't teach tiger-scaring to scare tigers; we teach it for the purpose of giving that noble courage. . . ." (Peddiwell, as cited in Sprinthall, 1979).

I am not advocating the teaching of dated facts, of demonstrably limited principles, of yesterday's newest discoveries. No, my goals are much more prosaic: I am advocating that we develop in our students "built-in, shockproof crap detectors"!

I do not think the discussion has recently focussed on teaching only facts as facts or dated curricula as principle. In a fast-paced, changing world so aptly described by Alvin Toffler in Future Shock, it would be folly to be advocating only the teaching of facts. By the time they're in a text they're two years dated, by the end of a text's useful life they're 7-10 years dated, and well on the way to being wrong or superceded. Rather, I think the discussion has been over the matters of our starting point and our objectives as we introduce our discipline to high school students. That, for me, is the issue, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Psychology as discipline

A perpetual and realistic fear of mine focuses on teaching psychology in the high

school as a junior version of the typical college-level introductory course which envisions psychology as discipline or as a collection of facts. That fails to recognize the very broad and diverse nature of the students in our high school psychology classes. Almost exclusively an elective course, it draws students primarily from the senior class--most surveys suggest the percentages of seniors there are in the high 90s. But the group is diverse--some are college-bound, others are immediately employment-bound. Some have time to consider the discipline in the abstract, others want the principles for immediate application--in interviewing and test-taking skills, for interpersonal skills that will help them on their job, for skills in how to dress and speak and interact so as to succeed and advance in their chosen occupation.

And what evidence do we find of psychology presented as discipline? Some might envision a course such as Marvin Trautwein's heavily operant-oriented course in the Minneapolis area, yet that is apparently a considerable success--continuing student enrollments and national attention directed to his activities leave little doubt as to the quality of what's being offered.

Second, consider the textbooks that are now being offered. The shift in the classic and aging Engle and Snellgrove text has been most interesting. In the 1979, 7th edition we find gone are chapters on "the family group", "the peer group", "some emotional problems of adolescents", and "the world of work". These have been replaced by the addition of chapters on "psychological methods", "measuring personality", "emotions", "motivation", and "treatment of personality disturbances". Clearly we see a shift toward psychology as content, as facts and principles, and away from psychology in high school simply as a course in personal adjustment.

Third, the students themselves are changing. As we enter a period of more stringent job requirements, potential depression, and lower rates of employment, we find students turning more and more to the "hard-fact" majors such as engineering, and demanding in all their courses a more pragmatic approach--what good will it do me?

show me how to use this knowledge!

Fourth, this shift toward a more discipline-based presentation even seems to have affected Psychology Today--the Madison Avenue, pop-magazine on topics more-or-less related to psychology. Started in the mid-60s as a slick, but data-based magazine, it grew gradually toward more superficial topics presented with more splash and less data. Now, in the past couple of years we're seeing a switch back toward tables of numbers and even graphs! So the evidence of a shift toward content is available.

Psychology as personal adjustment

But what of the other side? First, the various state and national surveys of high school psychology teachers have long indicated that a substantial majority of those teachers call themselves teachers of a psychology course emphasizing personal adjustment.

Second, consider the advantages of such an approach from a theoretical perspective. Piaget's Stage Theory of Cognitive Development hypothesizes that by age 16-17 students should be well into the process of developing their formal operational thought processes. Now able to conceptualize many simultaneously interacting variables, late adolescents' thoughts are increasingly controlled by logical principles as opposed to (only) perceptions and experiences. Clearly, late teenagers are intellectually capable of mastering our discipline regardless of the formal technique of presentation.

Erikson's Psychosocial Theory also has some valuable contributions to make regarding the abilities and interests of adolescents. He suggests that the major psychosocial crisis being dealt with by adolescents is "identity versus role diffusion." Starting from the assumption that humans retain the capacity to contribute to their own growth throughout life, Erikson suggests that we are shaped not only by environmental events, but also by how we organize and conceive of our own individual experiences. Moreover, the social group of which we are a part makes a significant contribution to our processes of growth. In short, an adolescent is attempting to resolve a centrally

important question of personal worth and meaning--who am I? What am I to do? Clearly such a person would respond positively to activities and discussions focussed on personal growth and means of assuring quality and significance in that growth.

Finally, Kohlberg pushes these concerns with cognitive style and content to include issues of moral judgment. Newman and Newman (1979) note that:

> "Kohlberg views adolescence as a vitally important period in the emergence of a personal morality. During this time of life, the awareness of one's subjective perspective of life events permits an appreciation of the relativistic nature of all moral principles" (1979, p. 35).

So there we have it. Students with newly acquired but fully adequate mental skills. Students searching for self-identity, one aspect of which involves the continuing need to make a series of complex moral judgments about self and others, about life and values, about a full array of life's challenges. (And we're expecting that student to be interested in jnds? in TATs? in learning curves?)

Third, if we look at various surveys concerning what topics high school psychology teachers (<u>with</u> a knowledge of the discipline) and the preferences of high school students (presumably <u>without</u> a knowledge of psychology) would like to study, it is quite revealing. The data show that for high school teachers the ten topmost preferred topics (in descending order of selection) are: emotions, conditioning and learning, depression, three views of personality, society and the abnormal, states of consciousness, parapsychology, cooperation/competition/aggression, motivations peculiar to humans, and pleasure/love/joy--reflecting greater sophisitcation in selection than exhibited by the students. Students' top ten preferences include: pleasure/love/joy, emotions, states of consciousness, depression, the family, pain, addiction, changing fears of childhood, development of memory, and family counseling among the 41 topics they might have selected--somewhat more heavily emphasizing hedonistic topics and those of immediate and obvious personal relevance. These data are drawn from a survey conducted by the

APA's Clearinghouse on Precollege Psychology in which they solicited teachers' and students' ratings of topics being considered for development in the NSF-funded Human Behavior Curriculum Project.

As a brief explanation/reaction to this, I would cite a valuable 1972 paper by R. J. Ross that appeared in a journal called Psychology in the Schools. Ross did a fine job of putting his finger on a key problem faced by high school teachers of psychology in the late sixties and early- to mid-70s. He suggested that a random sample of people on the street when queried about modern psychology would probably identify it as concerned with studying the mind, mental illness, Freud and ESP. . .among other topics. It is possible that high school students as well as their teachers--if they have little or no background in psychology, might hold similar views of psychology.

Ross identified two factors that tend to maintain those beliefs especially among poorly prepared precollege teachers of psychology. First, many high school teachers of psychology are isolated from subject-matter specialists in colleges and universities. Second, few of those teachers--perhaps as little as 1/3 even today--are able to teach only psychology, and even fewer are lucky enough to have a colleague who also teaches the discipline within the same school. Almost a dozen of the 30 teachers who participated in our NSF-funded workshop for high school teachers of psychology this past summer (1979) in Houston relayed to me variations of a comment to the effect that they were very pleased to be invited to the workshop--to share problems with fellow teachers, and to learn that they are not alone in this academic world--that others do share their interests in psychology, in specific methods of teaching, and in the science of behavior. And that's from the best and brightest--those well enough informed and connected to know of the NSF efforts and with enough spunk to apply and follow through by appearing! It's a revealing comment on the nature of the teaching environment in our high schools.

So those isolated teachers are faced with adolescents with rapidly expanding mental capacities faced with the problems of self-identity and serious moral judgments to

be made about themselves and their bodies. It's no surprise that what's done in the high school classroom tends more to stress issues of personal importance to the students. The isolated teacher--primarily the underprepared one pushed into service in response to the unanticipated growth of enrollments in psychology--would be unable to resist pressures to assist personal adjustment.

Resolution

Well? I am going to assert that I've created a straw person here--a pseudo-issue. In a 1979 paper Robert Stahl, Matiya and Hunt summarize data collected in a statewide survey of Illinois psychology teachers during the 1977-78 academic year. Asking teachers to identify themselves as offering "humanistic" or "behavioristic" courses, these investigators found only 14 significant differences in these teachers' psychology courses across 114 variables at the .05 level. Quoting these investigators:

"Among the important areas where these two groups of teachers were found to be identical are:

a) the methods that they used in teaching their courses;

b) the topics and content that they included in ther courses and that they thought should be included in their respective courses;

c) types of audio-visual aids and instructional materials that they wanted to see made available for their use;

d) the current area of their teacher certification;

e) the objectives they posited for their courses;

f) the degree level of their college training;

g) the average number of semester hours of college credit in psychology and educational psychology that they had earned;

h) the length of time their separate psychology courses met;

i) the racial composition of their class enrollments;

j) the type, size, and location of the schools in which they offered their

separate courses; and

k) the methods that they used in teaching their courses. (Stahl, Matiya, and Hunt, 1979, p. 3).

As these authors noted, there exists no real difference between self-identified Humanistic and Behavioristic teachers in their respective precollege courses. Obviously, we might wish to quibble about whether (a) these teachers have been able to distinguish between humanistic and behavioristic principles or (b) teachers "do their own thing" and then label it so as to please school district officers and significant others.

My own preference is to cite this as prime evidence of one of my assertions: That the "argument" between teaching psychology as discipline versus using the course as a facillitator of personal adjustment is a non-argument or addresses a non-issue. In a decade of listening I have not heard anyone argue that we ought to teach non-psychology, or that we should enshrine ad-hoc analyses as opposed to psychological principles, or that psychology per se should be presented as discipline only or only as a vehicle for meeting the rather short-sighted goal of adolescent personal adjustment.

A synthesis revisited

Where from here? Kasschau and Wertheimer (1974) were trying to point out that each camp--however identified--has valid arguments in its favor. Clearly the theories of Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg highlight the fact that our high school-aged students are adolescents with a series of well-defined, self-serving interests high on their list of priorities. As a teacher that tells me from where we start. We start with topics that will catch the attention of those students by couching the information we wish to put across in terms of the problems those students are currently facing.

Yet, no one would really argue: Research must precede application. How can we apply our principles and procedures with understanding without having previously conducted the research to gain that understanding? Thus the arguments of the disciplinarians convinces me as psychologist that what we teach our students must be couched in terms

of our science.

The issue of importance is our objectives for that high school psychology course. Resolution of that I will leave for another day. It seems to me we're driving toward two different goals when we address personal adjustment and the discipline of psychology. I would suggest an exact parallel exists between psychology and personal adjustment as exists between biology and medicine, chemistry and pharmacy, physics and engineering. If we are teaching psychology, then "personal adjustment" as an issue should enter our considerations only to the extent it influences the nature and receptivity of our students--what it will take to attract and maintain their attention. But as a rationale for teaching psychology I would suggest the importance of communicating to our students an understanding of the processes of psychology--engaging in an active campaign against the loose use of phrases such as "Oh, she's psychotic", or "He's of low intelligence--simply uneducable." As an ad hoc explanation these simply should not get through the "crap-detector". As psychology teachers we need to assure that our students are offered the skills by which to detect crap, to analyze and identify why it is thus, and to separate wheat from chaff. When we have done that, then we will have created students who are comfortable with "broken images"--by which I am referring to a poem by Robert Graves (1966). He writes:

> He is quick, thinking in clear images;
> I am slow, thinking in broken images.
>
> He becomes dull, trusting his clear images;
> I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images.
>
> Trusting his images, he assumes their relevance;
> mistrusting my images, I question their relevance.

Assuming their relevance, he assume the fact;

Questioning their relevance, I question the fact.

When the fact fails him, he questions his sense;

When the fact fails me, I approve my senses.

He continues quick and dull in his clear images;

I continue slow and sharp in my broken images.

He in a new confusion of his understanding;

I in a new understanding of my confusion.

I am advocating that we concentrate on creating students who are comfortable with their confusions because they are sure of their principles. Thank you.